

Case of the Dubious Missileman

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Washington

An Air Force major who won the Distinguished Flying Cross in Vietnam in 1967 was recommended for discharge last week because he questioned nuclear missile safeguards.

Eighteen months ago, Major Harold L. Hering, 38, was a student in the combat missile training school at Vandenberg Air Force Base. The school trains officers in the procedures that, upon receipt of a special coded command from the President, would send Minuteman

missiles and their atomic warheads toward targets 7000 miles away.

Hering, according to his military lawyer — Air Force Captain Gordin R. Edgin — asked questions.

"He wanted to know what checks and balances exist to verify that an unlawful order does not get in to the missileman," Edgin said. "He was concerned with such things as presidential imbalance, or anyone else initiating the system.

"He wanted to be assured of this, but he got conflicting advice. He received high as-

surances that there were checks and balances and not to worry."

But from others, Hering received private, conflicting advice that checks and balances on the President did not exist, Edgin said in an interview.

Hering — not satisfied with the assurances — left the training program.

At Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming, a board of inquiry made up of three colonels from the Strategic Air Command ruled last week, after four days of deliberation, that Hering had failed

to show cause why he should not face an administrative discharge for "failure to meet the duty performance standards of an officer."

Hering, who has 20 years of service and could voluntarily retire, does not want to leave the Air Force. Edgin says Hering had previously been selected for promotion to lieutenant colonel, and that his case will be appealed in coming months to an Air Force board of review and ultimately to the secretary of the Air Force.

Edgin said Hering felt the chances of an unlawful or-

der were "virtually remote, mathematically minor."

Nevertheless, Edgin said that without the concrete assurances Hering sought, the major voluntarily left the program "as a matter of conscience."

"He takes his oath of office very seriously with respect to carrying out all lawful orders, and in his capacity (as a missile control officer) he felt he wouldn't have had time" to assure the legality of the order in a real situation.

Edgin points out that Hering at no time indicated he

would not "turn the key" that launches the missile. He said Hering was not opposed to launching the weapon, only to making sure it was not the product of a president gone berserk or some other penetration of the control system.

The Air Force maintains that the control procedures are both tight and safe, and that the details of the command process at the highest civilian levels are beyond the "need to know" of the man in the missile silo control room.

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